SŪRAH 47

Muḥammad

Prologue

This *sūrah*, Muḥammad, was revealed in Madīnah. It also goes by another name, *al-Qitāl*, meaning 'Fighting'. This secondary title is very apt because fighting is the *sūrah*'s subject matter providing most of its images and giving it its distinctive beat. It begins with an explanation of the true nature of both the unbelievers and the believers which takes the form of a moral attack on the former and a monologue of praise of the latter. The clear implication is that God is the enemy of the unbelievers and the protector of those who have faith. Furthermore, this is a true fact in God's sight. Thus, the opening of the *sūrah* serves as a declaration of war by God against His enemies who are hostile to His faith: "*Those who disbelieve and debar others from God's path will have their deeds brought to nothing by Him, whereas those who have faith and do righteous deeds, and believe in what has been revealed to Muḥammad, for it is indeed the truth from their Lord – He will forgive them their bad deeds and bring them to a happy state. This is because the unbelievers follow falsehood, whereas those who believe follow the truth from their Lord. Thus does God lay down for mankind their rules of conduct.*" (Verses 1–3)

Once this declaration of war against the unbelievers is made, an express, resounding order is given to the believers to join this war against

them. This order is followed by an outline of the rules that apply to captives of war once the bloody battle is over: "*Now when you meet the unbelievers in battle, smite their necks. Then when you have thoroughly subdued them, bind them firmly. Thereafter, set them free either by an act of grace or against ransom, until war shall lay down its burden.*" (Verse 4) Added to this order is an explanation about the purpose of fighting and encouragement to the believers to join with it and do well, and a promise of honour for those who fall as martyrs. A further promise of help is given to those who join the fighting in support of God's cause, with an added rejoinder making clear that the unbelievers will be destroyed and their deeds will come to nothing: "*Thus [shall it be]. Had God so willed, He could have punished them Himself, but it is His will that He tests you all by means of one another. And as for those who are slain in God's cause, never will He let their deeds go to waste. He will grant them guidance, and bring them to a happy state, and will admit them to the Garden He has already made known to them. Believers! If you support [the cause of] God, He will support you and will make your steps firm; but as for the unbelievers, ill fortune awaits them as He will bring their deeds to nothing. This is because they hate what God has bestowed from on high, and thus He causes their deeds to go to waste.*" (Verses 4–9)

A strong warning is issued to the unbelievers, coupled with a declaration from God about His protection of the believers. The unbelievers will, thus, lose all; they will remain weak and lack support from any quarter: "*Have they never travelled through the land and seen what was the end of those who lived before their time? God destroyed them utterly. A similar fate awaits the unbelievers. This is because God protects the believers, while the unbelievers have no one to protect them.*" (Verses 10–11) A further warning singles out the city which drove the Prophet out: "*How many cities of greater power than this your city which has driven you out have We destroyed, and they had none to help them.*" (Verse 13)

Having opened with such a strong attack on the unbelievers, the *sūrah* adds a varied discourse on faith and unbelief, describing the states of the believers and the unbelievers both in this world and in the life to come. It distinguishes between a believer's enjoyment of

goodly things and the way unbelievers enjoy the pleasures of this world in a way that does not differ from that of cattle: "*God will indeed admit those who believe and do righteous deeds into gardens through which running waters flow, while those who disbelieve will enjoy their life [in this world] and eat as cattle eat; but the fire shall be their abode.*" (Verse 12) It describes what the believers will drink in heaven, variously pure water, milk with unaltered taste, delightful wine and pure, clarified honey. These drinks are so plentiful that they flow like rivers. Moreover, they have plenty of every type of fruit, together with God's forgiveness and His being pleased with them. A rhetorical question is then added: "*Are they to be compared to those who are to abide in the fire and be given a drink of scalding water that tears their bowels?*" (Verse 15)

This first round in the ever-raging battle between the believers and the unbelievers over, the *sūrah* starts another round with the hypocrites who, together with the Jews in Madīnah, represented a danger to the Muslim community. The problem they posed was no less serious than that of the idolaters who were waging open war on Islam from Makkah and its surrounding areas. The events to which the *sūrah* refers suggest that it talks about the period that followed the Battle of Badr but prior to the Encounter of the Moat.[1] The latter heralded a crushing defeat for the Jews and a serious setback for the hypocrites, as explained in our commentary on *Sūrah* 33, Volume XIV.

References to the hypocrites are made in the same confrontational and fighting manner as the rest of the *sūrah*. This is noticeable right from their first mention, which describes how they are absent minded when they sit with the Prophet and its comment that describes them as being far astray, following their desires: "*Some of them listen to you, but no sooner do they leave your presence than they [scornfully] say to those endowed with knowledge: 'What is it that he said just now?' Such are the ones whose hearts God has sealed, and who follow their desires.*" (Verse 16) They are warned that the Last Hour will inevitably come,

1. The Battle of Badr took place during Ramaḍān, year 2 of the Islamic calendar, while the Encounter of the Moat occured towards the end of year 5, (623 and 626 CE respectively) – Editor's note.

and, then, they will not even be able to take heed: "*Are they waiting for the Last Hour to come upon them of a sudden? Its portents have already come; but once it has arrived, what benefit will it then be to them if they take heed?*" (Verse 18)

The *sūrah* then describes their panic when they are confronted with an express Qur'ānic order to fight. They have pretended to be believers, and here we see how the *sūrah* makes abundantly clear the difference between them and true believers: "*The believers say: 'Would that a* sūrah *had been revealed.' Yet when a* sūrah *of clear import is revealed, and fighting is mentioned in it, you see those who are sick at heart staring at you like one who is about to faint for fear of death.*" (Verse 20) While they are urged to obey God and His messenger and to be truthful and firm, the *sūrah* condemns their behaviour and declares war against them. They are expelled from God's mercy: "*Far better for them would be obedience and an appropriate word. Moreover, when fighting is decided upon, it is better for them to be true to God. If you turn away now, is it to be expected of you that you will spread corruption in the land and break your ties of kinship? It is such as these whom God rejects, leaving them deaf and blind.*" (Verses 20–23)

The hypocrites' schemes are exposed: they listen to Satan and befriend the Jews and conspire with them against the believers. Therefore, they are warned about torture that would be inflicted on them at the point of death. They are also warned about exposure within the Muslim community to which they pretend to belong when they are not really part of it. On the contrary, they scheme against it: "*Those who turn their backs after guidance has been given to them are seduced by Satan who fills them with false hopes. That is because they say to those who abhor all that God has revealed, 'We will obey you in some matters,' but God knows all their secret schemes. How will they feel when the angels gather them in death, striking their faces and their backs? That is because they follow what incurs God's anger, and hate what pleases Him. Therefore, He will surely make all their deeds come to nothing. Do those who are sick at heart assume that God will never bring their malice to light? Had We so willed, We could have pointed them out to you, and you would have recognized them by their marks; but you will most certainly recognize them by the tone of their speech. God knows all that you people do. Most certainly We shall put*

you to the proof to see who of you strive hard and remain firm; and We shall test the truth of your assertions." (Verses 25–31)

The *sūrah*'s third and final round again takes up the attack against the unbelievers from among the Quraysh and the Jews: "*Those who disbelieve and debar others from the path of God, and take a hostile stand against the Prophet after they have seen the light of guidance, can in no way harm God; but He will surely make all their deeds come to nothing.*" (Verse 32) It warns the believers against falling into the same traps as their enemies: "*Believers, obey God and obey the messenger, and do not let your deeds come to nothing. Those who disbelieve and debar others from the path of God, and in the end die unbelievers shall not be granted forgiveness by God.*" (Verses 33–34) They are encouraged to remain firm during the fight: "*Therefore, do not lose heart or sue for peace. It is you who have the upper hand, and God is with you. He will never let your deeds go to waste.*" (Verse 35)

The life of this world is shown to be trivial. Believers are urged to spend some of their money to support God's cause. They are not meant to give away all they have; God knows their human nature and that they would find it too difficult to make such a sacrifice should it be asked of them: "*The life of this world is but play and amusement, but if you believe and are God-fearing, He will grant you your reward. He does not ask you to give up all your possessions. If He were to ask you all and press you hard, you would grow tight-fisted, and He would bring your malice to light.*" (Verses 36–37) The *sūrah* concludes with a note of warning to the Muslims, should they be niggardly, unwilling to spend some of their money for God's cause: "*You are called upon to give in God's cause, but some among you will turn out to be niggardly. Whoever is niggardly [in God's cause] is niggardly towards himself. God is the source of all wealth, whereas you are the ones in need. If you turn away, He will substitute other people for you, and they will not be like you.*" (Verse 38)

The air of battle colours the *sūrah* from start to finish; it is characteristic of its every section. The ending of its verses sound like heavy bombardments. When such endings are given a softer tone, they seem like swords branded in the air. The images the *sūrah* draws are as hard as the words expressing them. When referring to actual fighting,

the *sūrah* says: "*when you meet the unbelievers in battle, smite their necks.*" (Verse 4) The actual killing and the taking of prisoners is described graphically: "*Then when you have thoroughly subdued them, bind them firmly.*" (Verse 4) The condemnation of the unbelievers is expressed in equally powerful words: "*As for the unbelievers, ill fortune awaits them as He will bring their deeds to nothing.*" (Verse 8) The fate of earlier communities is also documented in a highly resounding way, both in words and connotations: "*God destroyed them utterly. A similar fate awaits the unbelievers.*" (Verse 10) As they are made to suffer in hell the unbelievers are shown as being "*given a drink of scalding water that tears their bowels*" (Verse 15) Likewise, the state of panic that overtakes the hypocrites is drawn intensely: "*you see those who are sick at heart staring at you like one who is about to faint for fear of death.*" (Verse 20) Even the gentle warning to the believers against turning away is given in the form of a decisive threat: "*If you turn away, He will substitute other people for you, and they will not be like you.*" (Verse 38)

Thus we see perfect harmony permeating the *sūrah*: its subject matter, images, connotations and rhythm.

I

Captives of War

Muḥammad

In the Name of God, the Lord of Grace, the Ever Merciful

بِسْمِ اللَّهِ الرَّحْمَٰنِ الرَّحِيمِ

Those who disbelieve and debar others from God's path will have their deeds brought to nothing by Him, (1)

الَّذِينَ كَفَرُوا وَصَدُّوا عَن سَبِيلِ اللَّهِ
أَضَلَّ أَعْمَالَهُمْ ﴿١﴾

whereas those who have faith and do righteous deeds, and believe in what has been revealed to Muḥammad, for it is indeed the truth from their Lord – He will forgive them their bad deeds and bring them to a happy state. (2)

وَالَّذِينَ آمَنُوا وَعَمِلُوا الصَّالِحَاتِ وَآمَنُوا
بِمَا نُزِّلَ عَلَىٰ مُحَمَّدٍ وَهُوَ الْحَقُّ مِن رَّبِّهِمْ كَفَّرَ
عَنْهُمْ سَيِّئَاتِهِمْ وَأَصْلَحَ بَالَهُمْ ﴿٢﴾

This is because the unbelievers follow falsehood, whereas those who believe follow the truth from their Lord. Thus does God lay down for mankind their rules of conduct. (3)

ذَٰلِكَ بِأَنَّ الَّذِينَ كَفَرُوا اتَّبَعُوا الْبَاطِلَ وَأَنَّ
الَّذِينَ آمَنُوا اتَّبَعُوا الْحَقَّ مِن رَّبِّهِمْ كَذَٰلِكَ
يَضْرِبُ اللَّهُ لِلنَّاسِ أَمْثَالَهُمْ ﴿٣﴾

فَإِذَا لَقِيتُمُ الَّذِينَ كَفَرُوا فَضَرْبَ الرِّقَابِ
حَتَّىٰ إِذَا أَثْخَنتُمُوهُمْ فَشُدُّوا الْوَثَاقَ فَإِمَّا
مَنًّا بَعْدُ وَإِمَّا فِدَاءً حَتَّىٰ تَضَعَ الْحَرْبُ
أَوْزَارَهَا ۚ ذَٰلِكَ وَلَوْ يَشَاءُ اللَّهُ لَانتَصَرَ
مِنْهُمْ وَلَٰكِن لِّيَبْلُوَ بَعْضَكُم بِبَعْضٍ ۗ
وَالَّذِينَ قُتِلُوا فِي سَبِيلِ اللَّهِ فَلَن يُضِلَّ
أَعْمَالَهُمْ ﴿٤﴾

Now when you meet the unbelievers in battle, smite their necks. Then when you have thoroughly subdued them, bind them firmly. Thereafter, set them free either by an act of grace or against ransom, until war shall lay down its burden. Thus [shall it be]. Had God so willed, He could have punished them Himself, but it is His will that He tests you all by means of one another. And as for those who are slain in God's cause, never will He let their deeds go to waste. (4)

سَيَهْدِيهِمْ وَيُصْلِحُ بَالَهُمْ ﴿٥﴾

He will grant them guidance, and bring them to a happy state, (5)

وَيُدْخِلُهُمُ الْجَنَّةَ عَرَّفَهَا لَهُمْ ﴿٦﴾

and will admit them to the Garden He has already made known to them. (6)

يَا أَيُّهَا الَّذِينَ آمَنُوا إِن تَنصُرُوا اللَّهَ
يَنصُرْكُمْ وَيُثَبِّتْ أَقْدَامَكُمْ ﴿٧﴾

Believers! If you support [the cause of] God, He will support you and will make your steps firm; (7)

وَالَّذِينَ كَفَرُوا فَتَعْسًا لَّهُمْ وَأَضَلَّ
أَعْمَالَهُمْ ﴿٨﴾

but as for the unbelievers, ill fortune awaits them as He will bring their deeds to nothing. (8)

ذَٰلِكَ بِأَنَّهُمْ كَرِهُوا مَا أَنزَلَ اللَّهُ
فَأَحْبَطَ أَعْمَالَهُمْ ﴿٩﴾

This is because they hate what God has bestowed from on high, and thus He causes their deeds to go to waste. (9)

أَفَلَمْ يَسِيرُوا۟ فِى ٱلْأَرْضِ فَيَنظُرُوا۟ كَيْفَ
كَانَ عَٰقِبَةُ ٱلَّذِينَ مِن قَبْلِهِمْ ۖ دَمَّرَ ٱللَّهُ
عَلَيْهِمْ ۖ وَلِلْكَٰفِرِينَ أَمْثَٰلُهَا ﴿١٠﴾

Have they never travelled through the land and seen what was the end of those who lived before their time? God destroyed them utterly. A similar fate awaits the unbelievers. (10)

ذَٰلِكَ بِأَنَّ ٱللَّهَ مَوْلَى ٱلَّذِينَ ءَامَنُوا۟ وَأَنَّ
ٱلْكَٰفِرِينَ لَا مَوْلَىٰ لَهُمْ ﴿١١﴾

This is because God protects the believers, while the unbelievers have no one to protect them. (11)

إِنَّ ٱللَّهَ يُدْخِلُ ٱلَّذِينَ ءَامَنُوا۟ وَعَمِلُوا۟
ٱلصَّٰلِحَٰتِ جَنَّٰتٍ تَجْرِى مِن تَحْتِهَا
ٱلْأَنْهَٰرُ ۖ وَٱلَّذِينَ كَفَرُوا۟ يَتَمَتَّعُونَ
وَيَأْكُلُونَ كَمَا تَأْكُلُ ٱلْأَنْعَٰمُ وَٱلنَّارُ
مَثْوًى لَّهُمْ ﴿١٢﴾

God will indeed admit those who believe and do righteous deeds into gardens through which running waters flow, while those who disbelieve will enjoy their life [in this world] and eat as cattle eat; but the fire shall be their abode. (12)

وَكَأَيِّن مِّن قَرْيَةٍ هِىَ أَشَدُّ قُوَّةً مِّن
قَرْيَتِكَ ٱلَّتِىٓ أَخْرَجَتْكَ أَهْلَكْنَٰهُمْ
فَلَا نَاصِرَ لَهُمْ ﴿١٣﴾

How many cities of greater power than this your city which has driven you out have We destroyed, and they had none to help them. (13)

أَفَمَن كَانَ عَلَىٰ بَيِّنَةٍ مِّن رَّبِّهِۦ كَمَن زُيِّنَ لَهُۥ
سُوٓءُ عَمَلِهِۦ وَٱتَّبَعُوٓا۟ أَهْوَآءَهُم ﴿١٤﴾

Is he who takes his stand on a clear evidence from his Lord like one to whom the evil of his own deeds seems goodly, or like those who follow their own desires? (14)

Such is the paradise which the God-fearing are promised: In it are rivers of water for ever pure, rivers of milk the taste of which never alters, rivers of wine, a delight for those who drink, and rivers of honey pure and clarified. In it they shall have all kinds of fruit. And they receive there forgiveness by their Lord. Are they to be compared to those who are to abide in the fire and be given a drink of scalding water that tears their bowels? (15)

مَّثَلُ ٱلْجَنَّةِ ٱلَّتِى وُعِدَ ٱلْمُتَّقُونَ ۖ فِيهَآ أَنْهَٰرٌ مِّن مَّآءٍ غَيْرِ ءَاسِنٍ وَأَنْهَٰرٌ مِّن لَّبَنٍ لَّمْ يَتَغَيَّرْ طَعْمُهُۥ وَأَنْهَٰرٌ مِّنْ خَمْرٍ لَّذَّةٍ لِّلشَّٰرِبِينَ وَأَنْهَٰرٌ مِّنْ عَسَلٍ مُّصَفًّى ۖ وَلَهُمْ فِيهَا مِن كُلِّ ٱلثَّمَرَٰتِ وَمَغْفِرَةٌ مِّن رَّبِّهِمْ ۖ كَمَنْ هُوَ خَٰلِدٌ فِى ٱلنَّارِ وَسُقُوا۟ مَآءً حَمِيمًا فَقَطَّعَ أَمْعَآءَهُمْ ﴿١٥﴾

Belief in Muḥammad's Revelations

The *sūrah* opens with a straightforward attack against the unbelievers, without any introduction or preparatory remarks. These unbelievers, who debar others from God's path, are faced with the prospect of their deeds going astray and ending up with nothing. This applies to all unbelievers whether they are those who debar others on their own initiative, or they themselves are debarred and then debar others from God's path. At the outset, the *sūrah* gives us a sense of deeds being animated, physically on the move, but their movements are erroneous, far astray, and without any defining goal. The result brings utter loss and destruction. Such animation is employed to provide an image of a battle in which the deeds separate themselves from the people who perform them: the result is that both go further astray from each other, and all ends in ruin.

These deeds that are brought to nothing may refer, in particular, to the ones that the unbelievers hoped would bring them good results; in other words, they appeared to them as good deeds. However, a good deed that is not based on faith loses its value; its goodness is superficial. What is important is the motive that gives rise to the deed, not the form

of the deed. Even if the motive is good, unless it relies on faith it may be only temporary or the result of sudden impulse. Faith, on the other hand, links all man's actions and feelings to a solid base. This gives deeds their meaning and aim, bringing them consistency and ensuring that their effects are in line with the Divine system that links all parts of the universe together. Thus, every action is seen to contribute to the overall progress of the universe, fulfilling a role and serving an end.

On the other side stand "*those who have faith and do righteous deeds, and believe in what has been revealed to Muḥammad, for it is indeed the truth from their Lord.*" (Verse 2) These people are described as having faith, which certainly includes believing in Muḥammad's revelations, but this aspect of belief is specifically highlighted in order to give it prominence since "*it is indeed the truth from their Lord.*" Faith that is established in one's heart and conscience must be accompanied by action that is clearly seen in life. Such action is the fruit of faith that indicates its presence. Such people have a special status: "*He will forgive them their bad deeds.*" (Verse 2) This contrasts with what happens to the deeds of the unbelievers: they go astray, even though they may initially seem to be good. Thus, while even good deeds done by unbelievers end up in nothing, the bad deeds of the believers are forgiven. The contrast here is perfect and absolute, emphasizing the value of faith in God's sight and in real life. Yet their reward goes further than this as God will "*bring them to a happy state.*" (Verse 2) This is a great blessing which is second to faith in importance and effect. The verse gives here connotations of perfect comfort, assurance, peace and happiness. When a person is in such a happy state, his thoughts are sound, his heart is reassured, his feelings are at ease, and his soul enjoys a sense of peace and security. What other blessing would anyone want?

Why do things go in these two opposite directions? There is no question of favouritism or coincidence in all this. Instead, it all relies on the fundamental law upon which the universe was established when God created the heavens and the earth in accordance with the truth, making the truth its basic foundation: "*This is because the unbelievers follow falsehood, whereas those who believe follow the truth from their Lord.*" (Verse 3) Falsehood cannot put down deep roots in the universe. Therefore, it ends up in nothing, as does everything founded upon it.

Since the unbelievers follow falsehood, their deeds go astray and are brought to nothing. By contrast, the truth is the foundation on which the structure of the universe is built. Therefore, everything related to it stays on. Since the believers follow the truth from their Lord, He will forgive them their sins and bring them to a happy state. It is all clear, based on solid principles. "*Thus does God lay down for mankind their rules of conduct.*" (Verse 3) The believers are clear about these rules, they know the basis around which they should make their choices.

An Order to Fight

The principle stated in the first verse of the *sūrah* is made the basis of the directive to the believers to fight the unbelievers. The believers are the ones who follow the truth that must be established in human life on earth. It, truth, should be given the power to conduct life's affairs. Thus, human life becomes based on the truth and refers everything to it. The unbelievers, on the other hand, follow falsehood. This should be removed with all its effects on human life: "*Now when you meet the unbelievers in battle, smite their necks. Then when you have thoroughly subdued them, bind them firmly. Thereafter, set them free either by an act of grace or against ransom, until war shall lay down its burden.*" (Verse 4) This verse refers specifically to meeting in battle, not any other meeting between believers and unbelievers. Up to the revelation of this *sūrah,* idolaters lived in the Arabian Peninsula, some of whom were at war with the believers and some bound by peace treaties. *Sūrah* 9, Repentance, had not as then been revealed giving notice that treaties specifying dates of expiry would not be renewed. On the other hand, treaties without a specific term were given a four-month notice of termination. Thereafter, idolaters were to be killed if they were found anywhere in the Arabian Peninsula. The aim of these rules was to make the Peninsula the permanent base of Islam.[2]

The verse tells the believers specifically to smite the unbelievers' necks, but this only occurs after Islam is explained to them and they reject the call to accept it. The order is given in a way that describes the

2. This rule does not apply to idolaters outside the Arabian Peninsula; they could continue to live in the Muslim state but only in accordance with Islamic rules.

actual killing and the action it requires, so as to fit with the general ambience of the *sūrah*.

"*Then when you have thoroughly subdued them, bind them firmly.*" (Verse 4) The Arabic verb '*athkhana*', translated here as 'subdue', also connotes strong fighting involving killing of opponents. The situation the verse envisages as a result of fighting is the total collapse of the enemy's power so as to leave the enemy incapable of putting up any defence, let alone launching a counterattack. At this point only, captives are taken. While the enemy still has substantial force, the fight goes on to remove the danger it presents.

Thus, like most commentators on the Qur'ān, we see no conflict between this verse and the one in *Sūrah* 8, The Spoils of War, which remonstrates with the Prophet and the Muslims for taking many captives of war during the Battle of Badr. At the time, continuing the battle to kill more of the unbelievers was a better option. The relevant verses state: "*It does not behove a Prophet to have captives unless he has battled strenuously in the land. You may desire the fleeting gains of this world, but God desires for you the good of the life to come. God is Almighty, Wise. Had it not been for a decree from God that had already gone forth, you would have been severely punished for what you have taken.*"[3] (8: 67–68) This means that killing the enemy and breaking its power comes first. When this has been accomplished, captives may be taken. The wisdom in all this is clearly apparent. To remove aggression by forces hostile to Islam must be the first objective of fighting, particularly when the numerical strength of the Muslim community is well below that of the unbelievers. In such circumstances as prevailed at the time of the Battle of Badr, killing an enemy fighter was far more important in the balance of power between the two sides. However, this ruling remains valid in general, and it should be applied in any armed conflict with the aim of making the enemy powerless.

The Ruling on Captives of War

The verse then sets the ruling concerning those who are taken captive in war. This is the only Qur'ānic text stating a ruling on such captives:

3. These verses are explained in Vol. VII, pp. 198–202.

"*Thereafter, set them free either by an act of grace or against ransom.*" (Verse 4) This means that captives of war are to be set free gratis, without any compensation. No specified ransom or exchange of prisoners is required. The Qur'ānic verse does not mention any third option, such as putting idolater captives to death or binding them into slavery. Nevertheless, what happened in practice was that the Prophet and the caliphs succeeding him put some war captives into slavery, and killed specifically named individuals. We will quote what Imām Abū Bakr al-Jaṣṣāṣ, of the Ḥanafī school of Islamic law, says about this verse in his book *Aḥkām al-Qur'ān*, making some comments as necessary. We will then conclude by stating our view of the relevant rulings:

> God says in this verse: "*Now when you meet the unbelievers in battle, smite their necks.*" On the surface, the statement makes it clear that killing the unbelievers is the only option until they have been thoroughly subdued. This is consistent with what God says in the other verse: "*It does not behove a Prophet to have captives unless he has battled strenuously in the land.*" (8: 67) Ibn 'Abbās is quoted as saying that this last statement applied to the Battle of Badr, when the Muslims were a small minority. When their numbers increased and they became more powerful, God established the ruling: "*Thereafter, set them free either by an act of grace or against ransom.*" Thus, God allowed the Prophet and the believers all options: to kill their prisoners, enslave them or set them free. However, the transmitter of this *ḥadīth* doubts whether Ibn 'Abbās mentioned enslaving prisoners.

Since the reporter was uncertain that Ibn 'Abbās mentioned slavery in this context, we discard that option altogether. As for killing such prisoners of war, we see no basis for this in the verse under discussion. The verse mentions only freeing them either as an act of grace or against ransom.[4]

4. The author makes several comments on this lengthy quotation. We have included his comments in separate paragraphs so as to distinguish them from the quoted text. – Editor's note.

> Al-Suddī is reported to have commented on the ruling, "*set them free either by an act of grace or against ransom,*" saying that it has been abrogated by the subsequent verse in *Sūrah* 9, stating: "*slay the idolaters wherever you find them.*" (9: 5) However, we say that the Qur'ānic statements: "*Now when you meet the unbelievers in battle, smite their necks,*" and "*It does not behove a Prophet to have captives unless he has battled strenuously in the land,*" and "*Should you meet them in battle, make of them a fearsome example for those who follow them,*" are most probably outlining valid rulings, none of which has been abrogated. God commanded His messenger to kill the unbelievers and not to take captives from among them until they had been thoroughly subdued. This was the case when the Muslims were small in number, compared with their enemy. In that situation, only when the unbelievers were subdued after being killed in numbers and were made an example of to those who followed them, was it then permissible to take some of them captive, keeping them alive. This should be a permanent rule, applicable at any time when the Muslims are in a similar situation to that which prevailed in the early days of Islam.

In comment, we say that the order to kill the idolaters wherever they were found applied specifically to the idolaters in the Arabian Peninsula. The verse in the present *sūrah* is general in its import. When the enemy is thoroughly subdued and its power is smashed, it is permissible to take prisoners. This was the practice followed by the caliphs after the Prophet. Prisoners were killed only in particular cases which we will explain presently.

> The statement, "*set them free either by an act of grace or against ransom,*" provides for one of two alternatives: freeing the prisoners either by an act of grace or against ransom, which suggests that killing them was prohibited. However, early scholars differ on this point. Al-Ḥasan is reported to have objected to killing prisoners of war, saying that they should be freed against ransom or indeed without it. 'Aṭā' is also reported to have held this view.

When asked what to do with prisoners, al-Ḥasan answered: 'Do with them what the Prophet did with the prisoners taken in the Battle of Badr: they were freed by an act of grace or against ransom.' Ibn 'Umar was given a prisoner, a man of high position from the city of Iṣṭakhr, so that he could kill him, but he refused to do so citing the Qur'ānic statement: "*set them free either by an act of grace or against ransom.*" Likewise, Mujāhid and Ibn Sīrīn are reported to have spoken against killing prisoners of war. We have already mentioned al-Suddī's view that this ruling was abrogated by the other Qur'ānic instruction: "*slay the idolaters wherever you find them.*" (9: 5) Likewise, Ibn Jurayj is of this view. He cited the case of 'Uqbah ibn Abī Mu'ayṭ whom the Prophet ordered to be killed after he was taken prisoner during the Battle of Badr.

Scholars from all provinces are unanimous that a prisoner of war may be killed, and we do not know of any taking a different view. Reports are numerous that the Prophet sanctioned such killing. He ordered the execution of 'Uqbah ibn Abī Mu'ayṭ and al-Naḍr ibn al-Ḥārith after the Battle of Badr, and Abū 'Azzah, the poet, after the Battle of Uḥud. He also put the Qurayẓah prisoners to death when they accepted Sa'd ibn Mu'ādh's judgement to the effect that their men must be executed and their offspring be enslaved. From among them, he set al-Zubayr ibn Bāṭā free by an act of grace. When he conquered Khaybar, partly by war and partly by peaceful agreement, he stipulated a clear condition on Ibn Abī al-Ḥuqayq, but when his treachery was exposed, he ordered his execution. When he later entered Makkah, he ordered the killing of a number of people, stating that they should be killed, 'even if found clinging to the robes of the Ka'bah.' However, he freed the people of Makkah and took nothing of their property.

Abū Bakr is quoted to have said: "I wish I had not ordered al-Fujā'ah to be burnt when he was brought to me. I wish I had ordered his execution normally or set him free." Abū Mūsā al-Ash'arī mentions that he executed the chief priest of al-Sūs, after he had given him a guarantee of safety for a number of people

whom the priest named. However, he forgot to include himself, and therefore, the guarantee of safety did not apply to him. So, Abū Mūsā ordered his execution.

All these reports and *aḥādīth* confirm, without any doubt, that the Prophet and his Companions approved the execution of prisoners of war or setting them free. This is the consensus of scholars in all regions.

The permissibility of executing prisoners of war cannot, however, just be based on the Qur'ānic statement. It should instead be viewed against the actions of the Prophet and some of his Companions. When we carefully consider all the cases where prisoners were killed, we find that they were all special; in other words, there were additional militating factors other than merely fighting against Muslims and subsequent captivity. The men killed after the Battles of Badr and Uḥud, namely, 'Uqbah, al-Naḍr and Abū 'Azzah, respectively, were all hostile opponents who were determined to harm the Prophet. The case of the Qurayẓah Jews was also special, given they had agreed, in advance, for judgement to be passed on them by Sa'd ibn Mu'ādh. In all these cases we find special reasons placing them outside the general rule on prisoners of war stated in this verse: "*set them free either by an act of grace or against ransom.*" (Verse 4)

Scholars differed on setting prisoners free against ransom. Those of our school, the Ḥanafī, maintain that a prisoner cannot be set free against financial ransom, and cannot be sold to the enemy so as to join them again in fighting. Abū Ḥanīfah also states that a prisoner of war cannot be set free in exchange for Muslim prisoners. In no way should he ever be returned to join an enemy army. Abū Yūsuf and Muḥammad ibn al-Ḥasan differ with Abū Ḥanīfah on this point, allowing the exchange of prisoners of war between Muslims and non-Muslims. This last view is subscribed to by major scholars like al-Thawrī and al-Awzā'ī. Al-Awzā'ī adds that it is permissible to sell prisoners of war to the enemy, but the men among them may not be sold except in an exchange of prisoners. On the other hand, al-Muznī quotes al-Shāfi'ī as saying

that a Muslim ruler may set male prisoners of war free by an act of grace or against ransom after their defeat.

Those who approve of exchange of prisoners and setting enemy prisoners free against financial ransom cite in support of their view the Qur'ānic statement: "*set them free either by an act of grace or against ransom.*" This apparently permits setting them free against ransom and in exchange for Muslim prisoners. They also cite the fact that the Prophet set Quraysh prisoners from the Battle of Badr free against financial ransom. As for the permissibility of an exchange of prisoners, they cite in support a *ḥadīth* reported by 'Imrān ibn Ḥuṣayn: "The Thaqīf tribe took two Companions of the Prophet prisoner, and the Muslims took a man from the tribe of 'Āmir ibn Ṣa'ṣa'ah prisoner. The Prophet passed by this prisoner when he was tied up, and the man called him. The Prophet went to him. He asked: 'Why am I taken prisoner?' The Prophet said: 'Because of your allies' offence.' The man said: 'But I am a Muslim.' The Prophet replied: 'Had you said this when you were free, you would have greatly prospered.' The Prophet moved away, but the man called him again. When the Prophet went to him, he said: 'Feed me, for I am hungry.' The Prophet said: 'This is what you need.' The Prophet then exchanged him for the two men taken captive by the Thaqīf."

In our view, the evidence in support of those who say that prisoners of war may be set free against ransom is weightier and more valid than that stated in support of the view of al-Jaṣṣāṣ's school. This is true even though they differ concerning the form of ransom and whether it is financial or in exchange with Muslim prisoners of war. Imām al-Jaṣṣāṣ concludes his discussion by endorsing the view of his Ḥanafī school of Islamic law:

As for the mention in this verse of freeing prisoners as an act of grace or against ransom, along with what is reported of the action concerning the prisoners during the Battle of Badr, all this is

abrogated by the Qur'ānic verse that says: "*Slay the idolaters wherever you find them, and take them captive, besiege them, and lie in wait for them at every conceivable place. Yet if they should repent, take to prayer and pay the* zakāt, *let them go their way.*" (9: 5) We have mentioned that this is the view of al-Suddī and Ibn Jurayj. Further confirmation of the abrogation is seen in the verse that says: "*Fight against those who – despite having been given Scriptures – do not truly believe in God and the Last Day, and do not treat as forbidden that which God and His messenger have forbidden, and do not follow the religion of truth, till they [agree to] pay the submission tax with a willing hand, after they have been humbled.*" (9: 29) Both verses speak of the duty to fight against the unbelievers until they accept Islam or pay tribute, or *jizyah*. To free them against ransom runs contrary to this. All commentators on the Qur'ān and scholars of *ḥadīth* agree that *Sūrah* 9, Repentance, was revealed later than *Sūrah* 47, Muḥammad, which means that the rulings it states abrogate the earlier ones including that of freeing them against ransom.

We have already stated that this ruling to kill idolaters unless they adopt Islam is specific to idolaters living in the Arabian Peninsula. Others living outside it can live in the Muslim state and pay a tribute, just like the payment of tribute is accepted from followers of earlier religions. That the tribute is accepted from them when they submit to the rule of the Muslim state does not preclude that some of them may fall prisoner before such submission. What ruling applies to such prisoners, then? We say that a Muslim ruler may free them by an act of grace if he determines that this serves the interests of the Muslim community. He may also free them against financial ransom or in exchange for Muslim prisoners, when their people continue to have a fighting force and remain hostile. When the enemy renounces hostility by agreeing to pay tribute to the Muslim state, a different situation applies with clearly specified rulings. This means that the ruling concerning prisoners of war continues to be valid in cases that are not settled by the payment of tribute.

What We Say

To sum up, this is the only Qur'ānic text providing a ruling on prisoners of war. All other texts relate to situations other than that of taking prisoners. Therefore, this represents the permanent basis for dealing with this question. In those cases where the practice differed, this was the result of specific and temporary situations. Putting some prisoners to death applied only in individual cases, which could be similar to future ones. Those individuals were executed for actions they committed before being taken prisoner. They were not killed merely for fighting the Muslims. A spy, for example, may be taken prisoner and tried. In this case, he is tried for spying, not for being an enemy soldier taken prisoner in open battle. His captivity merely brought him under the authority of the Muslim state.

A word needs to be said about placing prisoners of war in slavery. We have already stated on more than one occasion that this was in response to prevalent universal situations and common practices in war. These situations made it impossible for Islam to implement in all circumstances the general statement "*set them free either by an act of grace or against ransom,*" when enemy camps used to put any Muslim taken prisoner into slavery. Therefore, this ruling was applied by the Prophet in certain situations: he set free some prisoners in acts of grace, while in other cases he exchanged prisoners and in still other cases, he accepted financial ransom. In some cases prisoners were made slaves in order to deal with situations that could not be otherwise dealt with.

Should all camps agree not to treat prisoners of war as slaves, Islam reverts to its single positive ruling in the matter: "*set them free either by an act of grace or against ransom.*" Putting prisoners into slavery is not an Islamic rule; it is a procedure dealing with special circumstances. This is the view that we derive from this clear Qur'ānic statement and from carefully studying different cases, events and situations.

I should perhaps make it clear that I support this view because the Qur'ānic statements and the study of events and cases support it. It does not occur to me that I should defend Islam against the accusation that it puts prisoners into slavery. Such a thought I never entertain. Had Islam adopted this practice, it would have been the right and

better one. No human being with any degree of good manners would ever say that his view is better than God's ruling. I only look at the Qur'ānic text, its wording and spirit. It is on this basis that I have formulated my view.

All this, i.e fighting, smiting the necks of unbelievers, binding them firmly and dealing with the captives according to this rule, continues "*until war shall lay down its burden.*" (Verse 4) This means until war is over between Islam and its opponents. It remains the permanent Islamic rule. According to a *ḥadīth* related by Abū Dāwūd on Anas's authority, the Prophet says: "*Jihād* shall continue until the Day of Judgement." Its purpose is to ensure that God's word remains supreme.

The Purpose of *Jihād*

God does not require believers to fight and go on *jihād* because He needs their help against the unbelievers. Far be it from Him to need help. He is able, should He wish, to destroy those unbelievers utterly. It is all a test for mankind which determines everyone's position:

> *Thus [shall it be]. Had God so willed, He could have punished them Himself, but it is His will that He tests you all by means of one another. And as for those who are slain in God's cause, never will He let their deeds go to waste. He will grant them guidance, and bring them to a happy state, and will admit them to the Garden He has already made known to them.* (Verses 4–6)

Those unbelievers who debar people from God's path, and their ilk throughout the earth, at all times, and those despots who exercise power unjustly and appear to command force and authority, behaving in all arrogance, are no more than a handful of creatures living on earth. The earth is nothing but a tiny little planet floating in the midst of countless other planets, stars, celestial systems and galaxies whose sizes and numbers are known only to God. In the universal expanse, worlds and galaxies appear merely as scattered points, and as though they float aimlessly. None other than God controls them all and ensures harmony between them.

Despots, their entourages and followers, indeed all people on earth, are no more than small ants when compared with God's power. No indeed, they are not even like tiny particles blown everywhere by a light breeze. They are just nothing. When God commands believers to smite the necks of unbelievers and to bind them firmly after they have been utterly subdued, He only makes of them a tool of His power. Had He so willed, He would have dealt with them directly, as He did with those whom he destroyed by floods, a stunning blast or wind. He can indeed punish them Himself, without using any of these forces. God, however, wants the best for the believers. Therefore, He tests them and cultivates what is good in them, making it easier for them to do the best of good works.

God wants to test the believers, bringing out the best potential in man. The highest level a human being attains is when the truth he believes in becomes so dear to him that he will fight for it, exposing himself to death, but also being willing to kill his opponents. He simply will not compromise on this truth he believes in, and cannot live or love life unless it be under such truth. God wants to cultivate the believers, so that every desire and aspiration pertaining to this transitory life on earth, dear as it may be normally to man, is progressively weakened. He wants to purge them of their weaknesses and compensate them for their shortcomings until all their desires respond to the call to *jihād* and the earning of His pleasure. God will thus know that those people have successfully passed the test and have been properly cultivated. They do not make their choices on impulse, but on the basis of careful consideration.

God also wants to elevate the believers. When they go through the hardships of *jihād*, exposing themselves to the danger of death at every turn, they learn to care little for this danger. For most people, however, this is so frightening that they shed much of their moral values and dignity to avoid it. Yet it is of little consequence to those who are used to exposing themselves to it, whether they eventually avoid it or not. To turn to God alone at every moment of danger produces an effect which is best compared to an electric shock. It is like remoulding people's hearts and souls in full clarity and purity.

Moreover, such a test provides the means to put the affairs of the whole community on the right basis, placing its leadership in the hands of those who strive so strenuously for God's cause ready to sacrifice themselves for it. Such people care little for worldly riches and luxuries. When they are the ones who have the leadership of human society, the whole world will be set on the right footing. Furthermore, it facilitates the way for people to earn God's pleasure and His reward without having to face the reckoning. By contrast, those in the opposite camp find it easy to do what incurs God's displeasure and exposes them to His punishment. Everyone will have his way made easy for him to follow, according to God's knowledge of the true nature of all.

Thus, God tells us about those who are killed, fighting for His cause: "*And as for those who are slain in God's cause, never will He let their deeds go to waste. He will grant them guidance, and bring them to a happy state, and will admit them to the Garden He has already made known to them.* (Verses 4–6) The first thing to note here is the contrast between what happens to the deeds of martyrs and what happens to those of unbelievers. In the case of the unbelievers, the *sūrah* started with the statement that "*their deeds [are] brought to nothing*," by God. Here the verse says of martyrs: "*never will He let their deeds go to waste.*" Theirs are good deeds, done in accordance with Divine guidance, linked to the solid truth by which they are motivated and in defence of which they are undertaken. They will remain because the truth is permanent and will never be lost.

We then face the great truth of the continuing life of martyrs killed in God's cause. This is a fact already stated in the Qur'ān: "*Do not say of those who are killed in God's cause, 'They are dead.' They are alive, although you do not perceive that.*" (2: 154) This great truth is presented here in a new light. We see the life of the martyr extending and growing in the way it followed before it left this world, the way of obedience to God and sacrifice for His cause: "*He will grant them guidance, and bring them to a happy state.*" (Verse 5) It was for the cause of God that they were slain and so He will continue to guide them after their martyrdom, promising them that they will attain to a happy state, as their souls will be purged of any traces of earthly life's burdens. They will grow in purity so as to be suited to the absolute purity of the ones

on high to which they are raised. This means that theirs is a continuing, uninterrupted life except in an earthly sense. God takes care of their lives, increases them in guidance, purity and shining. Ultimately, He fulfils His promise to them, for He "*will admit them to the Garden He has already made known to them.* (Verse 6)

A *ḥadīth* related by Aḥmad quotes the Prophet as saying: "A martyr is given six special privileges: with the first drop of his blood, he is forgiven every sin he has ever committed; he sees his position in heaven; and he is given his maiden companions, security from the greatest fear, torment in the grave and his adornment of true faith." Another *ḥadīth* related by al-Tirmidhī and Ibn Mājah specifically states that a martyr is made to see his position in heaven. This is how God makes heaven known to martyrs, and such is the end of continuing guidance and the happy state they are brought into after departing life on earth.

Purely for God's Sake

The *sūrah* then urges the believers to dedicate themselves to God and the implementation of His code in human life. It promises them His support in battle as well as defeat and hardship for His and their enemies:

> *Believers! If you support [the cause of] God, He will support you and will make your steps firm; but as for the unbelievers, ill fortune awaits them as He will bring their deeds to nothing. This is because they hate what God has bestowed from on high, and thus He causes their deeds to go to waste.* (Verses 7–9)

How do believers support God so as to fulfil the condition and receive what He has promised them of His support and steadying their step? What God requires of them is that they should be fully dedicated to Him, associating no partners with Him whatsoever, whether in a subtle or open way. They must love God more than they love themselves or their desires. They must refer to His rulings on everything they desire or wish for, as well as on their public and private actions, their thoughts and feelings. Such is the way to support God within ourselves.

Moreover, we know that God has laid down a complete code for life, based on certain rules and values; in short, a complete concept of life and the universe. In practical life, our supporting God is fulfilled when we make this code the arbiter of everything we do, when we implement His way of life in all aspects.

We need to reflect for a moment on the two phrases: "*those who are slain in God's cause,*" and "*If you support God.*" In both cases of being slain and giving support, the basic condition is that the action should be dedicated to God and serve His cause. Although this goes without saying, it is often blurred when faith suffers from deviation in one generation or another. In such cases we notice that words like martyrdom and *jihād* are twisted to serve cheap causes. It should be clear that there is no such thing as *jihād*, martyrdom or admission into heaven unless such *jihād* is for God's cause only, death for His sake alone, and the support we give within ourselves and in society is to Him alone. The objective must be that His word should be supreme; that His law and code of living should rule over people's consciences, morality, behaviour, laws and systems. Abū Mūsā al-Ash'arī reports: "The Prophet was asked about a person who fights to prove his bravery, support his people or to show off: which of these could be fighting in God's cause? He answered: 'Only the one who fights so that God's word remains supreme fights for God's cause.'" [Related by al-Bukhārī, Muslim, Abū Dāwūd, al-Nasā'ī and al-Tirmidhī.] There can be no other banner or goal under or for which people can fight and fall martyrs to be included in God's promise of admission to heaven other than His banner and His cause. This is true no matter what banner is raised and no matter what goals are defined under deviant systems and governments.

Advocates of Divine faith are best advised to understand this truth and keep it in their minds pure of any deviant concept. They must never allow thoughts that are alien to the Islamic faith to creep into their minds. If people strive for any purpose other than making God's word supreme, then their striving is not for Him, and when they are killed they do not earn martyr status. They cannot expect God's help and cannot hope to be in heaven. Advocates of Divine faith must make their vision clear. If they find this hard, the least they can do is to free

their thoughts and feelings from the concepts of their environment which are in conflict with the essence of God's conditional statement: "*Believers! If you support [the cause of] God, He will support you and will make your steps firm.*" (Verse 7)

Such is the condition God requires to be fulfilled by believers. What He gives them in return is His support, ensuring victory and making their steps firm. This is God's promise which never fails. If it is delayed at some point, its delay serves another purpose which is accomplished when God's support, victory and firmness of step are fulfilled.[5]

We need to reflect a little on the way God's promise is stated: "*He will support you and will make your steps firm.*" The Arabic word, *yanṣurkum*, translated here as '*support you*', also means '*gives you victory*'. We tend to think first that firmness of step is necessary before victory can be achieved; in fact, it is an important element in gaining victory. This is so true. That it occurs second in this text indicates a different meaning. What is intended here is that believers remain firm when victory has been achieved so that they can shoulder the responsibilities that come with victory. Victory is not the end of the battle between faith and unfaith, the truth and falsehood. Victory imposes certain duties within the minds of the victorious and in life generally. Those who achieve victory must not allow conceit to creep into their minds, nor should they grow complacent. Many people may remain steadfast when the going is tough and the hardships are plenty, but few are those who do not weaken after victory or when life is easy and comfortable. To remain steadfast, upholding the truth after victory, is an even higher grade than gaining victory. Perhaps this is the meaning intended in this verse, but God knows best.

"*As for the unbelievers, ill fortune awaits them as He will bring their deeds to nothing.*" (Verse 8) This is the opposite of granting help and firmness of step. This is an invocation of ill fortune which means that they will inevitably have ill fortune, humiliation and lack of support. Furthermore, their deeds will come to nothing, which means utter loss. The reason for all this is stated: "*This is because they hate what*

5. For further clarification of this point, see Vol. XII, pp. 134–142.

God has bestowed from on high, and thus He causes their deeds to go to waste. (Verse 9)

This describes what they entertain of hatred to what God has revealed: the Qur'ān containing His law and the code He lays down for human life. This is what prompts them to stubbornly reject the faith and entertain futile argument about it. Many are those with corrupt minds who hate the sound Divine code and find themselves, by nature, in conflict with it. We often meet such people and we sense their deep hatred of Islam and everything related to it. They are scared by the mere mention of it. In fact, such hatred is easily noticed these days.

Because of their hatred of God's revelations, He let their deeds go to waste. Again the Qur'ān uses its preferred method of drawing images. The Arabic word, *aḥbaṭa*, translated here as *'cause to go to waste'*, normally describes cattle with swollen bellies as a result of feeding on poisoned grass. This ends in certain death. In the same way, those people who hate God's revelations find their deeds swollen and apparently growing, only to end in waste and utter loss. It is a vivid image that shows motion, and an end corresponding to that of the ones who hate God's revelations and admire their own works that appear to them great. Yet they are only swollen in the same way as the bellies of cattle grazing on poisonous grass.

Superficial Enjoyment

The unbelievers' attention is forcibly drawn to the fates of earlier ignorant communities:

> *Have they never travelled through the land and seen what was the end of those who lived before their time? God destroyed them utterly. A similar fate awaits the unbelievers.* (Verse 10)

This is a strong and forceful statement accompanied by loud noises and an image of the earlier communities witnessing the destruction of everything around them. All their possessions are amassed in heaps while they themselves are buried under the debris; it is an image of

total destruction. They are told that such a fate awaits all unbelievers; they will reap nothing but devastation and ruin: "*A similar fate awaits the unbelievers.*" (Verse 10) This fearful prospect contrasts with that of the believers who will receive support and victory: "*This is because God protects the believers, while the unbelievers have no one to protect them.*" (Verse 11) The constant rule being that when God is his protector, man need not worry about anything. Whatever happens to him should be seen as a test that heralds something good. It is never a sign of being abandoned by God, nor can it be seen as failure by God to fulfil His promise to support His servants. The one who is not so protected by God, however, will have no protection, even if all of mankind and the *jinn* are his patrons and supporters. Ultimately, he will be lost even though all means of protection and all sources of power known to mankind are at his disposal.

Having explained the lots of both believers and unbelievers when conflict and war erupt between them, the *sūrah* outlines their shares of enjoyment, making clear the distinction between the two:

> *God will indeed admit those who believe and do righteous deeds into gardens through which running waters flow, while those who disbelieve will enjoy their life [in this world] and eat as cattle eat; but the fire shall be their abode.* (Verse 12)

Believers who do good may sometimes be given luxuries and comforts of the best type to enjoy, but the comparison here is drawn between the believers' truly great share in heaven on the one hand and the total lot of the unbelievers on the other. The believers receive their share from God's hand in the heavens through which running waters flow. It is God who admits them there. Hence, it is a great, noble share given to them in reward for their faith and good deeds. By contrast, the share of the unbelievers is merely some enjoyment and the partaking of food '*as cattle eat*'. This is a miserable image unfit for man. It is an image of vulgar enjoyment and an animal-like approach to food, lacking both taste and manners. It is an enjoyment that is subject to no control; man has neither will, choice nor conscience in all this. Furthermore, it is unchecked by any sense of fear of God.

Regardless of their beliefs, people may have very fine culinary tastes and may be very selective in what they enjoy. This is certainly true of most people who grow up in wealthy families. This is not, however, what is referred to here. Rather, what the verse points to is that when man is in control of his will and has his values in place, he will choose only what is good in God's sight. He makes his choice using his will, free of the pressure of desire and cheap enjoyment. With such a will, he does not look at life as if it is a sumptuous feast of food and drink, or as though it is a chance for uncontrolled pleasure, paying little or no attention to what is lawful or unlawful.

The essential difference between man and animals is that man is equipped with free will and has a concept of life based on values stated by God, the Creator of all life. When man loses this, he sheds the most important qualities that distinguish him from other creatures and for which God has granted him special honour.

This series of comparisons between believers and unbelievers is interrupted by a reference to the city that drove the Prophet out, comparing it with other cities and communities that perished even though they were far more powerful: "*How many cities of greater power than this your city which has driven you out have We destroyed, and they had none to help them.*" (Verse 13) This verse is reported to have been revealed when the Prophet was on his way from Makkah to Madīnah, having been driven out by the unbelievers. It was revealed by way of consolation to him, reminding him that those unbelievers who had opposed his message so determinedly, until he and his followers had to abandon their land and property and migrate for the sake of their faith, are truly powerless. In the end, they are subject to God's power.

The Reward: a Physical Image

The comparison between the two groups continues. This by virtue of an explanation outlining why the believers are admitted into gardens of bliss in the life to come after they have been given support and honour in this present life. It also explains why the unbelievers who lived a life of animal enjoyment in this world, are subjected to punishment in the next life:

> *Is he who takes his stand on a clear evidence from his Lord like one to whom the evil of his own deeds seems goodly, or like those who follow their own desires?* (Verse 14)

There is a fundamental difference between the conditions, codes of life and behaviour of the two groups. The believers are equipped with clear evidence from their Lord. They recognize the truth and are certain of its source. They receive their directives and instructions from God and are sure of what they receive. No deception or error exists in their way of life. The unbelievers, by contrast, are deceived, thinking their deeds to be good when they are essentially bad. They do not make certain of what they receive nor whether it is true or good. They only '*follow their own desires*' with no standard of control to refer to and with no light to help them distinguish what is true and what is false. Are these two groups alike? The answer can only be in the negative for they are fundamentally different in their conditions and practices. Hence, they cannot be the same in their rewards and destinies.

Then follows an image of the differences between the two in the ends to which they are heading:

> *Such is the paradise which the God-fearing are promised: In it are rivers of water for ever pure, rivers of milk the taste of which never alters, rivers of wine, a delight for those who drink, and rivers of honey pure and clarified. In it they shall have all kinds of fruit. And they receive there forgiveness by their Lord. Are they to be compared to those who are to abide in the fire and be given a drink of scalding water that tears their bowels?* (Verse 15)

Such physical descriptions of reward and punishment in the hereafter occur in several places in the Qur'ān. They may be accompanied with other mental images or given on their own. Likewise, mental images are often given on their own in the Qur'ān. It is God who has created mankind, and He knows best what affects and influences them and what is conducive to cultivating the better elements in their nature. He also knows what enjoyment or suffering is best in bringing out the best in them. People possess different qualities and characteristics that

are all combined within human nature but differ in their manifestation in each individual. Hence, God has given us detailed accounts of the types of comfort and suffering, pleasure and pain, according to His absolute knowledge of His creatures.

Some people are best motivated to good action and most contented with their reward when they are told that they shall have rivers of pure water, healthy milk, pure, clarified honey and delightful wine, as well as fruits of all kinds, together with forgiveness that ensures their admission to heaven. These people are given what is suitable to cultivate the best in them and ensure that they receive their fitting reward. There are others who worship God because they want to thank Him for the countless blessings He has given them, or because they love Him and try to draw closer to Him through their worship, just as lovers lean towards each other, or because they are too ashamed to be seen in any condition that does not please God. In their worship, they do not look up to heaven and hell, bliss or suffering. These are best motivated when they read God's words: "*As for those who believe and do righteous deeds, God will certainly bestow love on them.*" (19: 96) They feel their greatest bliss when they learn that they will be "*in a seat of truth, in the presence of an all-powerful Sovereign.*" (54: 55)

It is reported that the Prophet used to stand up in night worship until his feet swelled. 'Ā'ishah, his wife, asked him why he did so when God had assured him of total forgiveness for all his sins, past and future. He replied: "'Ā'ishah! Should I not, then, be a grateful servant of God?" [Related by Muslim.] Rābi'ah al-'Adawiyyah wondered: "Would it be true that without heaven and hell, no one would have worshipped or feared God?" When Sufyān al-Thawrī, a leading scholar of the *Tābi'īn* generation, asked her about the nature of her faith in God, she said to him: "I do not worship God for fear of hell or craving for heaven. I would then be no better than a miserable hired servant. I worship Him because I yearn to meet Him."

In between these two types there is a wide range of different natures and mentalities. They all find in what God describes of bliss and suffering, reward and punishment, what ensures the cultivation of what is best in them in this present life and what is fitting as a reward in the life to come. It should be noted that the images of happiness and

suffering grow in sophistication as the listeners become more refined by greater exposure to the Qur'ān, and according to the types of situations being addressed. This is true of all generations and communities.

The requital is of two types: the first includes all these rivers together with plentiful and varied fruit as well as God's forgiveness. The other is thus outlined: "*Are they to be compared to those who are to abide in the fire and be given a drink of scalding water that tears their bowels?* (Verse 15) Again, this is a physical image of fierce torture that fits the ambience of the *sūrah*. It also fits the crude nature of the unbelievers, for they are the ones who approach their enjoyments and their food like animals. It is a crude atmosphere. Hence, they are requited with boiling water that tears at their bowels and bellies. The two groups are totally different in their nature and code of life. Most certainly their requital will not be the same.

2

What Fate for Sealed Hearts

وَمِنْهُم مَّن يَسْتَمِعُ إِلَيْكَ حَتَّىٰٓ إِذَا خَرَجُوا۟ مِنْ عِندِكَ قَالُوا۟ لِلَّذِينَ أُوتُوا۟ ٱلْعِلْمَ مَاذَا قَالَ ءَانِفًا ۚ أُو۟لَٰٓئِكَ ٱلَّذِينَ طَبَعَ ٱللَّهُ عَلَىٰ قُلُوبِهِمْ وَٱتَّبَعُوٓا۟ أَهْوَآءَهُمْ ﴿١٦﴾

Some of them listen to you, but no sooner do they leave your presence than they [scornfully] say to those endowed with knowledge: 'What is it that he said just now?' Such are the ones whose hearts God has sealed, and who follow their desires. (16)

وَٱلَّذِينَ ٱهْتَدَوْا۟ زَادَهُمْ هُدًى وَءَاتَىٰهُمْ تَقْوَىٰهُمْ ﴿١٧﴾

As for those who accept Divine guidance, God increases them in guidance and causes them to grow in the quality of God-fearing. (17)

فَهَلْ يَنظُرُونَ إِلَّا ٱلسَّاعَةَ أَن تَأْتِيَهُم بَغْتَةً ۖ فَقَدْ جَآءَ أَشْرَاطُهَا ۖ فَأَنَّىٰ لَهُمْ إِذَا جَآءَتْهُمْ ذِكْرَىٰهُمْ ﴿١٨﴾

Are they waiting for the Last Hour to come upon them of a sudden? Its portents have already come; but once it has arrived, what benefit will it then be to them if they take heed? (18)

فَٱعْلَمْ أَنَّهُۥ لَآ إِلَٰهَ إِلَّا ٱللَّهُ وَٱسْتَغْفِرْ لِذَنۢبِكَ وَلِلْمُؤْمِنِينَ وَٱلْمُؤْمِنَٰتِ ۗ وَٱللَّهُ يَعْلَمُ مُتَقَلَّبَكُمْ وَمَثْوَىٰكُمْ ﴿١٩﴾

Know, then, that there is no deity other than God, and pray to Him to forgive you your sins, and to forgive all believing men and women. God knows all your comings and goings, as well as your abiding at rest. (19)

The believers say: 'Would that a *sūrah* had been revealed.' Yet when a *sūrah* of clear import is revealed, and fighting is mentioned in it, you see those who are sick at heart staring at you like one who is about to faint for fear of death. Far better for them would be (20)

وَيَقُولُ ٱلَّذِينَ ءَامَنُوا۟ لَوْلَا نُزِّلَتْ سُورَةٌ ۖ فَإِذَآ أُنزِلَتْ سُورَةٌ مُّحْكَمَةٌ وَذُكِرَ فِيهَا ٱلْقِتَالُ ۙ رَأَيْتَ ٱلَّذِينَ فِى قُلُوبِهِم مَّرَضٌ يَنظُرُونَ إِلَيْكَ نَظَرَ ٱلْمَغْشِىِّ عَلَيْهِ مِنَ ٱلْمَوْتِ ۖ فَأَوْلَىٰ لَهُمْ ﴿٢٠﴾

obedience and an appropriate word. Moreover, when fighting is decided upon, it is better for them to be true to God. (21)

طَاعَةٌ وَقَوْلٌ مَّعْرُوفٌ ۚ فَإِذَا عَزَمَ ٱلْأَمْرُ فَلَوْ صَدَقُوا۟ ٱللَّهَ لَكَانَ خَيْرًا لَّهُمْ ﴿٢١﴾

If you turn away now, is it to be expected of you that you will spread corruption in the land and break your ties of kinship? (22)

فَهَلْ عَسَيْتُمْ إِن تَوَلَّيْتُمْ أَن تُفْسِدُوا۟ فِى ٱلْأَرْضِ وَتُقَطِّعُوٓا۟ أَرْحَامَكُمْ ﴿٢٢﴾

It is such as these whom God rejects, leaving them deaf and blind. (23)

أُو۟لَٰٓئِكَ ٱلَّذِينَ لَعَنَهُمُ ٱللَّهُ فَأَصَمَّهُمْ وَأَعْمَىٰٓ أَبْصَٰرَهُمْ ﴿٢٣﴾

Will they not, then, try to understand the Qur'ān? Or are there locks on their hearts? (24)

أَفَلَا يَتَدَبَّرُونَ ٱلْقُرْءَانَ أَمْ عَلَىٰ قُلُوبٍ أَقْفَالُهَآ ﴿٢٤﴾

Those who turn their backs after guidance has been given to them are seduced by Satan who fills them with false hopes. (25)

إِنَّ ٱلَّذِينَ ٱرْتَدُّوا۟ عَلَىٰٓ أَدْبَٰرِهِم مِّنۢ بَعْدِ مَا تَبَيَّنَ لَهُمُ ٱلْهُدَى ۙ ٱلشَّيْطَٰنُ سَوَّلَ لَهُمْ وَأَمْلَىٰ لَهُمْ ﴿٢٥﴾

ذَٰلِكَ بِأَنَّهُمْ قَالُوا لِلَّذِينَ كَرِهُوا مَا
نَزَّلَ اللَّهُ سَنُطِيعُكُمْ فِي بَعْضِ
الْأَمْرِ وَاللَّهُ يَعْلَمُ إِسْرَارَهُمْ ﴿٢٦﴾

That is because they say to those who abhor all that God has revealed, 'We will obey you in some matters,' but God knows all their secret schemes. (26)

فَكَيْفَ إِذَا تَوَفَّتْهُمُ الْمَلَائِكَةُ يَضْرِبُونَ
وُجُوهَهُمْ وَأَدْبَارَهُمْ ﴿٢٧﴾

How will they feel when the angels gather them in death, striking their faces and their backs? (27)

ذَٰلِكَ بِأَنَّهُمُ اتَّبَعُوا مَا أَسْخَطَ
اللَّهَ وَكَرِهُوا رِضْوَانَهُ فَأَحْبَطَ
أَعْمَالَهُمْ ﴿٢٨﴾

That is because they follow what incurs God's anger, and hate what pleases Him. Therefore, He will surely make all their deeds come to nothing. (28)

أَمْ حَسِبَ الَّذِينَ فِي قُلُوبِهِم مَّرَضٌ أَن
لَّن يُخْرِجَ اللَّهُ أَضْغَانَهُمْ ﴿٢٩﴾

Do those who are sick at heart assume that God will never bring their malice to light? (29)

وَلَوْ نَشَاءُ لَأَرَيْنَاكَهُمْ فَلَعَرَفْتَهُم
بِسِيمَاهُمْ ۚ وَلَتَعْرِفَنَّهُمْ فِي لَحْنِ
الْقَوْلِ ۚ وَاللَّهُ يَعْلَمُ أَعْمَالَكُمْ ﴿٣٠﴾

Had We so willed, We could have pointed them out to you, and you would have recognized them by their marks; but you will most certainly recognize them by the tone of their speech. God knows all that you people do. (30)

وَلَنَبْلُوَنَّكُمْ حَتَّىٰ نَعْلَمَ الْمُجَاهِدِينَ مِنكُمْ
وَالصَّابِرِينَ وَنَبْلُوَ أَخْبَارَكُمْ ﴿٣١﴾

Most certainly We shall put you to the proof to see who of you strive hard and remain firm; and We shall test the truth of your assertions. (31)

Overview

In this passage the *sūrah* speaks about the hypocrites. In the first instance it depicts their attitude towards the Prophet and the Qur'ān, then their attitude to fighting which God requires Muslims to undertake in the service of His cause. Finally, it reveals their attitude towards the Jews and their conspiring with them against Islam and the Muslim community.

It should be remembered that hypocrisy first started in Madīnah. It did not exist in Makkah, as the situation there made it totally unnecessary. In Makkah, the Muslims suffered persecution and no one needed to appease them. When God facilitated support for Islam with its acceptance by the two tribes of Madīnah, the Aws and the Khazraj, the new faith spread into all clans and families. There were Muslims in every home in Madīnah. Some, however, hated to see the Prophet and Islam gaining power but dared not make their hostility public. Therefore, they pretended to be Muslim when in reality they were full of hatred for Islam. They were also keen for ill fortune to befall the Prophet and his Companions. Their chief was 'Abdullāh ibn Ubayy ibn Salūl.

A Jewish community also lived in Madīnah. The Jews had a military and economic presence as well as organizational strength at the time the Prophet settled in Madīnah. They also hated the Prophet, his faith and his followers. The presence of such Jews offered encouragement to the hypocrites: essentially, the two groups were united in their hatred of Islam and the Muslims. As a result, they conspired and exploited every opportunity to undermine the Muslim community. When the Muslim community experienced difficult circumstances, their opponents made their hostility all the more apparent; and when the Muslims enjoyed good times, they resorted to covert action and wicked conspiracy. Up to the middle of the Prophet's stay in Madīnah, these two groups represented a real danger to Islam and the Muslim community.

Repeated mention of the hypocrites and their schemes occur in the *sūrahs* revealed in Madīnah, and in which they come in for clear denunciation. Their contacts with the Jews and cooperation with them

is also referred to in such revelations. In the present passage, we have such references to both the hypocrites and the Jews.

How Divine Guidance Works

> *Some of them listen to you, but no sooner do they leave your presence than they [scornfully] say to those endowed with knowledge: 'What is it that he said just now?' Such are the ones whose hearts God has sealed, and who follow their desires.* (Verse 16)

The phrase, '*some of them*', may refer to the unbelievers who were the subject of discussion in the first passage of the *sūrah*. In this case, the hypocrites are considered as a group of unbelievers, although they conceal their reality. In this sense, the *sūrah* is referring to their true status. On the other hand, the phrase may refer to the Muslims, considering that the hypocrites were integrated with them, pretending to belong to their community. They were indeed treated as Muslims, as Islam requires us to deal with people on the basis of what they profess to be. In either case, however, they are hypocrites as their description in the *sūrah* and their deeds indicate.

The hypocrites' question, after they had listened to the Prophet, shows how they only pretended to pay attention to what he was saying when their minds were inattentive, preoccupied with other things, or rather were sealed altogether. It also suggests an implicit ridicule. Since they address their question to people endowed with knowledge asking about the meaning of what they heard, they imply that what Muḥammad said was incomprehensible. Despite having paid attention to it, they still could not understand its meaning. It further implies ridicule of those knowledgeable people who attended carefully to everything the Prophet said, making an effort to understand it fully and memorize it, as the Prophet's Companions used to do. In this way, using blatant or subtle mockery, these hypocrites asked them to repeat the Prophet's words. In all these possibilities we see wickedness, deep resentment and hatred: "*Such are the ones whose hearts God has sealed, and who follow their desires.*" (Verse 16)

Such is the condition of the hypocrites. Those who follow Divine guidance, however, are totally different:

> *As for those who accept Divine guidance, God increases them in guidance and causes them to grow in the quality of God-fearing.* (Verse 17)

The order of reporting events in this verse calls for reflection. The believers start by accepting guidance, and God rewards them by increasing this guidance so that they do not err. He further gives them an even more profound reward, as He "*causes them to grow in the quality of God-fearing.*" This quality makes a person's heart always apprehensive, feeling that God is watching him, fearing that he might incur God's displeasure whilst hoping to earn His pleasure, and ashamed that God may see him in a situation of which He disapproves. Such a keen sensitivity is the essence of being God-fearing. It is a great prize which God grants to whomever He chooses of His servants when they accept His guidance and strive to earn His pleasure. Guidance, sensitivity and being God-fearing describe a condition that is the opposite of the hypocrisy described in the previous verse.

The *sūrah* picks up its description of the hypocrites who leave the Prophet's presence having understood nothing of his teachings, which aim to enhance people's fear of God, and remind them of what is certain to come of reckoning and requital:

> *Are they waiting for the Last Hour to come upon them of a sudden? Its portents have already come; but once it has arrived, what benefit will it then be to them if they take heed?* (Verse 18)

What do these people who sit with the Prophet and later leave, having understood or learnt nothing, wait for? Are they waiting for the Last Hour to come upon them all of a sudden while they are preoccupied with worldly matters? Well, the portents of the Last Hour have already come, as have its signs. The revelation of the last Divine message is the clearest of all these portents. It announces that it is the last warning before the appointed time for the Last Hour. The Prophet

is quoted as saying: "I was sent with my message, nothing separates me from the Last Hour more than what separates my two fingers." [Related by al-Bukhārī and Muslim.] If time appears to have extended long since the Prophet's time, we should remember that God's days are different from our days. According to God's reckoning, its first signs have already come. No reasonable person should allow it to come upon him all of a sudden, when he can no longer attend to a duty: "*Once it has arrived, what benefit will it then be to them if they take heed?*" This serves as a strong reminder to those who are oblivious.

The *sūrah* then addresses the Prophet and the well-guided people who follow him telling them to follow a different course based on true knowledge, remembrance of God and seeking His forgiveness and feeling that He watches over them and knows everything about them. They will then be on their guard as they await the Last Hour:

> *Know, then, that there is no deity other than God, and pray to Him to forgive you your sins, and to forgive all believing men and women. God knows all your comings and goings, as well as your abiding at rest.* (Verse 19)

This directive points first of all to the need to always remember the first truth which the Prophet and those who follow him uphold: "*Know, then, that there is no deity other than God.*" Once this truth is firmly established in man's conscience, other directives are given: "*And pray to Him to forgive you your sins.*" This is said to the Prophet whom God has already forgiven his past and future sins, because it is the duty of every believer who is aware that his efforts fall short of fulfilling his duty, no matter how hard he tries. In this way, every believer feels that his prayer for forgiveness serves as an aspect of glorifying God and thanking Him for His forgiveness. Moreover, it is a lesson to the Prophet's Companions and followers who know his high position with his Lord, yet see that he is instructed to remember God and to pray to Him for forgiveness for himself and all believers, men and women. They know that God always answers the Prophet's prayers. They then feel that God has bestowed on them a great blessing by sending them this noble Prophet and instructing

him to pray to Him to forgive them. Thus, they are sure that He will forgive them their sins.

The final point in this directive is that "*God knows all your comings and goings, as well as your abiding at rest.*" (Verse 19) Thus a believer feels both reassurance and fear at the same time. He is reassured that he is under God's care wherever he is, and he is in fear because God knows every feeling and thought he may have, and is aware of his every secret. This is all part of education that keeps a believer always on the look out, keen to remain always on the right track.

The Hypocrites and *Jihād*

The *sūrah* describes the attitude of the hypocrites to fighting for God's cause and their utter cowardice when it is made obligatory upon Muslims. It exposes their true feelings about the whole idea of fighting, and explains what awaits them if they persist with hypocrisy. It warns them that they have to purge their hearts of hypocrisy, be true in their response to God and join the Muslim ranks with sincerity of purpose:

> *The believers say: 'Would that a* sūrah *had been revealed.' Yet when a* sūrah *of clear import is revealed, and fighting is mentioned in it, you see those who are sick at heart staring at you like one who is about to faint for fear of death. Far better for them would be obedience and an appropriate word. Moreover, when fighting is decided upon, it is better for them to be true to God. If you turn away now, is it to be expected of you that you will spread corruption in the land and break your ties of kinship? It is such as these whom God rejects, leaving them deaf and blind. Will they not, then, try to understand the Qur'ān? Or are there locks on their hearts?* (Verses 20–24)

The believers express their wishes for a new *sūrah* to be revealed because they love the Qur'ān and find in every part of it something that appeals to them and warms their hearts. Alternatively, this expression may be indicative of their desire to have certain aspects of *jihād* and fighting outlined to them. Therefore they say: "*Would that a* sūrah *had been revealed.*" (Verse 20)

We are then told that a *sūrah* with clear import that admits no divergence of opinion has been bestowed from on high. "*Fighting is mentioned in it,*" which means that this *sūrah* gives an order to the Muslim community to fight for God's cause, or outlines a ruling concerning those who disobey such an order. This is seen as a calamity by the hypocrites: they lose control of their feelings and their pretence is exposed. They appear weak, cowardly and spineless. Their pathetic condition is described in full colours: "*you see those who are sick at heart staring at you like one who is about to faint for fear of death.*" (Verse 20) This is a unique way of describing extreme fear, one that shows them shaking with fear, too weak to stand up. This inimitable image applies to everyone deprived of faith, true courage and a sense of shame when they face the possibility of death in war. This is the true nature of the hypocrites who are sick at heart.

When all false appearances are shed and the reality of cowardice is exposed, the hand of faith is stretched out to offer them what strengthens their resolve and gives them power if they would only take it with sincerity: "*Far better for them would be obedience and an appropriate word. Moreover, when fighting is decided upon, it is better for them to be true to God.*" (Verses 20–21) Undoubtedly, this is better for them than a scandal that exposes them as trembling, spineless cowards. It is better for them to be obedient to God's order, reassured that it is for their benefit and the benefit of their community, and to say a good, appropriate word expressing sincerity and purity of heart. When matters are resolved and fighting is decided upon, it is even better for them to be true to what they claim of commitment to His cause, manifesting this commitment with unwavering resolve and determined action. He will then give them added power and clear support that removes hardship, lightens the danger and ensures that they enjoy one of two noble prospects: either victory and safety on the one hand or martyrdom and admittance to heaven on the other. Such is the gift of faith that replaces fear with reassurance and weakness with courage and resolve.

The *sūrah* then addresses them directly, threatening them with dire consequences should their cowardice persist to the point where they abandon Islam altogether and revert to outright unbelief: "*If you turn*

away now, is it to be expected of you that you will spread corruption in the land and break your ties of kinship?" (Verse 22) The interrogative form, '*is it to be expected of you*', suggests that this is likely and gives a warning that this will lead them back into the ignorance that prevailed in their community before it was reformed by Islam. This is a state that makes people spread corruption and sever their ties of kinship.

Having made this direct address, the *sūrah* then speaks about them, rather than to them, showing what happens should matters reach the point they have been warned against: "*It is such as these whom God rejects, leaving them deaf and blind. Will they not, then, try to understand the Qur'ān? Or are there locks on their hearts?*" (Verses 23–24) '*It is such as these*' who persist with hypocrisy until they finally discard all pretence of belief in Islam who are the ones whom God rejects. He leaves them deprived of guidance, '*deaf and blind.*' They have not lost their hearing or their eyesight, but they have put these faculties to no use. Alternatively, they have deliberately stopped themselves from understanding what they hear and see. Thus, their faculties no longer function.

A rhetorical question is then asked: "*Will they not, then, try to understand the Qur'ān?*" (Verse 24) When people try to understand the Qur'ān, they see things in full clarity. They see the light. Their hearts and feelings enjoy new vigour and their souls are full of life. "*Or are there locks on their hearts?*" (Verse 24) When hearts are thus locked they are deprived of the light the Qur'ān spreads; they are in complete darkness.

Evil Conspiracy

The *sūrah* then shows the reason that made the hypocrites turn away from faith after having come close to it. We learn that this was because they conspired with the Jews of Madīnah and promised them help and support:

> *Those who turn their backs after guidance has been given to them are seduced by Satan who fills them with false hopes. That is because*

they say to those who abhor all that God has revealed, 'We will obey you in some matters,' but God knows all their secret schemes. (Verses 25–26)

The first of these two verses gives a physical image ofthe hypocrites abandoning Divine guidance after they came to know it. It is an image which shows them turning their backs and going away. It tells of what lies behind all this: it is Satan whispering to them and delivering all manner of temptations. Thus we see their movement for what it is in reality and appearance. The *sūrah* then tells us why Satan has such power over them, making them turn their backs on the truth after they knew it: "*That is because they say to those who abhor all that God has revealed, 'We will obey you in some matters'.*" (Verse 26)

The Jews of Madīnah were the first to hate what God revealed. They expected that God's final message would be given to them, with the last messenger chosen from among their own kind. They used to tell the pagan Arabs about this expected message and that its time was close to hand, saying that the new prophet would lead them and ensure that they would have power and that they would regain their kingdom. God, however, chose His last messenger from a different branch of Abraham's seed. This made them hate his message all the more. When the Prophet migrated to Madīnah, they hated his arrival there because they felt it threatened their own position. Therefore, they were hostile towards him from his very first day in Madīnah. When they realized that they were no match for the Muslims in open warfare, they resorted to wicked scheming and conspiracies. They were joined in this by all those bearing a grudge against Islam and every hypocrite. This war between them and the Prophet continued, going to and fro, until the Prophet removed them from Madīnah and then ensured that the Arabian Peninsula would remain totally for Islam.

Those hypocrites who turned their backs on Divine guidance said to the Jews: "*We will obey you in some matters.*" Most probably this refers to their wicked schemes and conspiracies against Islam and the Prophet. "*But God knows all their secret schemes.*" (Verse 26) This is a comment that implies a stern warning. What harm can their schemes produce when they are all known to God and exposed to His might?

This is followed by an open threat, one that puts them in the hands of God's own troops as they approach the ends of their lives: "*How will they feel when the angels gather them in death, striking their faces and their backs?*" (Verse 27) Here, we have another image of the utter humiliation suffered by the hypocrites. They are at the point when they depart from this life. Weak and powerless, they are about to start their second life, but this commences with their faces and backs being smitten. This happens to them at the point of death, when they are in utter distress. They are indeed completely forsaken: "*That is because they follow what incurs God's anger, and hate what pleases Him. Therefore, He will surely make all their deeds come to nothing.*" (Verse 28) They brought themselves to this end. It is they who have been hypocrites, disobeying God and conspiring with His enemies and the enemies of His messenger. It is they who hated what pleases God and adopted what incurs His displeasure. "*Therefore, He will surely make all their deeds come to nothing.*" (Verse 28) They used to admire their own deeds, thinking themselves clever as they schemed against the believers. Now they see how these deeds swell and grow only to be lost and to come to nothing.

The Threat of Exposure

At the end of this passage, they are warned that God may decide to expose them to the Prophet and the Muslims. They will then be known to all for what they really are: hypocrites living among Muslims, pretending to belong to them but conspiring against them:

> *Do those who are sick at heart assume that God will never bring their malice to light? Had We so willed, We could have pointed them out to you, and you would have recognized them by their marks; but you will most certainly recognize them by the tone of their speech. God knows all that you people do. Most certainly We shall put you to the proof to see who of you strive hard and remain firm; and We shall test the truth of your assertions.* (Verses 29–31)

The hypocrites thought that they were adept in hiding their reality, making the Muslims think they were like them, true believers. The

sūrah shows how naïve their thinking is and threatens them with an exposure that makes all their grudges known to the Muslims. God says to His messenger: "*Had We so willed, We could have pointed them out to you, and you would have recognized them by their marks.*" (Verse 30) This means that if God so wishes, He could point them out to the Prophet by name and position so he can recognize them from their features. This verse was revealed before God actually made some of them known to him by name. Nevertheless, the way they speak and their twisting of words and meanings, and the manner in which they address you tells you of their hypocrisy: "*but you will most certainly recognize them by the tone of their speech.*" (Verse 30) A comment is then added emphasizing God's knowledge of every deed and its motives: "*God knows all that you people do.*" (Verse 30) Nothing escapes His perfect knowledge.

Then follows God's promise to test the Muslim community as a whole so as to distinguish those who strive for His cause and remain steadfast through all difficulties. These people will then be known to all, with everything about them made clear. No confusion will persist, and the whole issue of hypocrisy and the hypocrites will be sorted out: "*Most certainly We shall put you to the proof to see who of you strive hard and remain firm; and We shall test the truth of your assertions.*" (Verse 31)

God is fully aware of everyone's true nature, as well as of their thoughts and inner feelings. He knows all this just as He knows what happens and what will happen. What need is there, then, for such a test? Who needs to know what the test will prove?

In His infinite wisdom, God deals with human beings on the basis of their nature, ability and potential. They do not know what He knows of inner facts. These must come into the open before they can know and understand them, and then make use of them. Testing people with what is good or bad, affluence and poverty, comfort and hardship certainly proves everyone's metal. Through such tests people may even come to know certain things about themselves of which they were otherwise unaware. As for God's knowledge of what the test reveals of people's nature, this refers only to His knowledge of their reality as it is exposed to people and they too are able to see it. It is when people

see this in a form they can comprehend that they are influenced by it. It shapes their feelings and charts the direction in which their lives move according to the means available to them. In this way God's purpose of testing people produces its results.

Nevertheless, believers always hope that they will not be put to God's tests and also hope that they will be spared such difficulties. Yet, should they be tested with hardship, they remain patient in adversity, aware that there is a good purpose behind this test. They submit to God's will, assured of His wisdom, and looking forward to His grace that follows the test. One devoted person, named al-Fuḍayl, was said to be in tears whenever he read this verse. He would appeal to God, saying: "My Lord, do not test us, because if You do, the truth about us will be known and the curtains we put up will be drawn apart. We will then be in trouble."

3

An Invitation to Sacrifice

إِنَّ ٱلَّذِينَ كَفَرُوا۟ وَصَدُّوا۟ عَن سَبِيلِ
ٱللَّهِ وَشَآقُّوا۟ ٱلرَّسُولَ مِنۢ بَعْدِ مَا تَبَيَّنَ
لَهُمُ ٱلْهُدَىٰ لَن يَضُرُّوا۟ ٱللَّهَ شَيْـًٔا
وَسَيُحْبِطُ أَعْمَٰلَهُمْ ﴿٣٢﴾

Those who disbelieve and debar others from the path of God, and take a hostile stand against the Prophet after they have seen the light of guidance, can in no way harm God; but He will surely make all their deeds come to nothing. (32)

يَٰٓأَيُّهَا ٱلَّذِينَ ءَامَنُوٓا۟ أَطِيعُوا۟ ٱللَّهَ وَأَطِيعُوا۟
ٱلرَّسُولَ وَلَا تُبْطِلُوٓا۟ أَعْمَٰلَكُمْ ﴿٣٣﴾

Believers, obey God and obey the messenger, and do not let your deeds come to nothing. (33)

إِنَّ ٱلَّذِينَ كَفَرُوا۟ وَصَدُّوا۟ عَن سَبِيلِ
ٱللَّهِ ثُمَّ مَاتُوا۟ وَهُمْ كُفَّارٌ فَلَن يَغْفِرَ ٱللَّهُ
لَهُمْ ﴿٣٤﴾

Those who disbelieve and debar others from the path of God, and in the end die unbelievers shall not be granted forgiveness by God. (34)

فَلَا تَهِنُوا۟ وَتَدْعُوٓا۟ إِلَى ٱلسَّلْمِ وَأَنتُمُ ٱلْأَعْلَوْنَ
وَٱللَّهُ مَعَكُمْ وَلَن يَتِرَكُمْ أَعْمَٰلَكُمْ ﴿٣٥﴾

Therefore, do not lose heart or sue for peace. It is you who have the upper hand, and God is with you. He will never let your deeds go to waste. (35)

The life of this world is but play and amusement, but if you believe and are God-fearing, He will grant you your reward. He does not ask you to give up all your possessions. (36)

إِنَّمَا ٱلْحَيَوٰةُ ٱلدُّنْيَا لَعِبٌ وَلَهْوٌ ۚ وَإِن تُؤْمِنُوا۟ وَتَتَّقُوا۟ يُؤْتِكُمْ أُجُورَكُمْ وَلَا يَسْـَٔلْكُمْ أَمْوَٰلَكُمْ ﴿٣٦﴾

If He were to ask you all and press you hard, you would grow tight-fisted, and He would bring your malice to light. (37)

إِن يَسْـَٔلْكُمُوهَا فَيُحْفِكُمْ تَبْخَلُوا۟ وَيُخْرِجْ أَضْغَٰنَكُمْ ﴿٣٧﴾

You are called upon to give in God's cause, but some among you will turn out to be niggardly. Whoever is niggardly [in God's cause] is niggardly towards himself. God is the source of all wealth, whereas you are the ones in need. If you turn away, He will substitute other people for you, and they will not be like you. (38)

هَٰٓأَنتُمْ هَٰٓؤُلَآءِ تُدْعَوْنَ لِتُنفِقُوا۟ فِى سَبِيلِ ٱللَّهِ ۖ فَمِنكُم مَّن يَبْخَلُ ۖ وَمَن يَبْخَلْ فَإِنَّمَا يَبْخَلُ عَن نَّفْسِهِۦ ۚ وَٱللَّهُ ٱلْغَنِىُّ وَأَنتُمُ ٱلْفُقَرَآءُ ۚ وَإِن تَتَوَلَّوْا۟ يَسْتَبْدِلْ قَوْمًا غَيْرَكُمْ ثُمَّ لَا يَكُونُوٓا۟ أَمْثَٰلَكُم ﴿٣٨﴾

Overview

This last part of the *sūrah* speaks first about the unbelievers who debar others from God's way and are hostile to the Prophet despite being aware of the truth of his message. Most probably this refers to the idolaters the *sūrah* spoke about earlier. They are the ones who fit the description of bearing arrogant hostility towards the Islamic message. However, this new discourse may refer to all those who adopt such a hostile attitude including the Jews and the hypocrites in Madīnah. In this light, the present verses may be seen as a warning to them, should they adopt such an attitude, in public or private. The first possibility is perhaps more likely.

This part then devotes its final verses to an address to the believers, inviting them to carry on with their *jihād*, being ready to sacrifice their lives and their property, never slackening or giving in to calls for a truce in the fight against unbelieving aggressors. They must not be influenced by any consideration of their apparent weakness, or immediate interest. Nor can they be niggardly when they are asked for financial sacrifice. After all, God who knows man's natural instinct to hold tight to what he owns wants them to contribute only what they can easily afford. Should they fail to prove themselves worthy of advocating His message, God will deprive them of this honour and put in their place some other people who will shoulder the responsibility and fulfil the task. This is a strong warning that fits the general ambience of the *sūrah*. It also suggests that it was needed to deal with certain cases within the Muslim community, among true Muslims, not hypocrites. There could have been those who found it hard to make financial contributions side by side with those who gave great examples of courage, dedication and preparedness to sacrifice their all for the cause of Islam. Both types existed, and the Qur'ān aimed to motivate the lower group to rise and try to join the other in its sublime standards.

They Cannot Harm God

> *Those who disbelieve and debar others from the path of God, and take a hostile stand against the Prophet after they have seen the light of guidance, can in no way harm God; but He will surely make all their deeds come to nothing.* (Verse 32)

This verse states a true promise by God in relation to those who disbelieve and oppose the truth, trying to prevent it from being delivered to people, using their power, money and other means for the purpose. Such people are hostile to the Prophet, waging war against him and physically opposing him during his lifetime or suppressing his faith and code of life and persecuting the advocates of his message after his death. Yet such people have seen the light of guidance and recognized the truth embodied in the Islamic message, but they

stubbornly choose to remain blind to it and feel that their immediate interests are served by such an attitude.

God's true promise is that such people "*can in no way harm God.*" They are far too small and weak to be mentioned in the context of adversely affecting God. This is certainly not what is intended here. What the verse means is that they cannot harm God's faith, the code He laid down for human life, or those who advocate His message. Powerful as such people may become, they cannot affect or disturb the laws of nature He has set in operation. They may be able to harm some of the Muslims for a period of time, but this is merely a test that takes place for a purpose God wants to be fulfilled. It constitutes no real harm to God's laws or to His servants who advocate His faith and system. Moreover, the ultimate result of all the efforts of such hostile unbelievers is clearly set in advance: "*He will surely make all their deeds come to nothing.*" (Verse 32)

At the same time, the believers are warned against doing anything that could lead them to a similar fate. They are urged to remain obedient to God and His messenger: "*Believers, obey God and obey the messenger, and do not let your deeds come to nothing.*" (Verse 33) This directive suggests that within the Muslim community there were some who might not have been fully obedient, or who might have found it hard to fulfil some of the duties and sacrifices that combating the different powerful groups opposing Islam required. Some might have been tied by bonds of kinship or common interests with others on the opposing side and found it hard to sever such ties.

This directive had a profound effect on true believers. They were shaken by the implied threat that they might do something that would do away with their good deeds and bring them to nothing. Several reports speak of the way this verse was received. One of them mentions that "the Prophet's Companions used to think that when a person truly believed in God's oneness, then no sin he committed would harm him, in the same way as no good deed is of any use when done by a person who associates partners with God. However, when this verse was revealed, they feared that sins might ruin their good deeds: "*Believers, obey God and obey the messenger, and do not let your deeds come to nothing.*"

'Abdullāh ibn 'Umar is quoted as saying: "We, the Prophet's Companions, used to think that every good deed would inevitably be accepted by God until this verse was revealed. We wondered what thing could render our deeds worthless. We thought that it must be cardinal and grave sins. However, God revealed this verse: "*For a certainty, God does not forgive that partners should be associated with Him, but He forgives any lesser sin to whomever He wills.*" (4: 116) We stopped speaking about this issue. We only feared for those who committed cardinal sins and hoped for good reward for those who avoided them."

Such reports clearly show how true Muslims used to receive Qur'ānic verses. They were profoundly affected by them, fearing every warning, careful lest it applied to them and keen to do what the Qur'ān required of them. With such sensitivity, they achieved superb standards.

The next verse explains what fate awaits those who are hostile to the Prophet. These are they who are determined not to obey him and who continue in their rejection of the truth until death overtakes them: "*Those who disbelieve and debar others from the path of God, and in the end die unbelievers shall not be granted forgiveness by God.*" (Verse 34) The chance to ensure forgiveness of sins is available only in this present life. The gates of repentance, which ensure forgiveness, are open for both unbelievers and sinners up to the moment of death. When the spirit is at the point of departing the body, then the chance to repent and earn forgiveness is lost and can never be regained.

Verses like this one address both believers and unbelievers. It warns the latter to take the right action before it is too late, to repent and turn back to God before the chance is lost and doors are closed. It tells the former to take care so as to avoid all causes that bring them nearer to such ill-fated ways. This is clearly understood from the fact that what the believers are cautioned against in the next verse are seen as reasons leading to the same fate of the unbelievers mentioned in the preceding verse:

> *Therefore, do not lose heart or sue for peace. It is you who have the upper hand, and God is with you. He will never let your deeds go to waste.* (Verse 35)

Such are the things believers are cautioned against. They are presented with the fate of the unbelievers who are hostile to the Prophet, so that they take care not to do anything that brings them nearer to such an outcome. This warning suggests that there might have been some individuals among the Muslims who felt the burden and strain of *jihād* to be too heavy. They might have weakened and advocated making some sort of a peace deal in order to avoid fighting. Some of them might have looked to their relatives in the ranks of the unbelievers, or had some financial interests with them. All such reasons may make a person prefer peaceful arrangements. Human beings are always the same and Islam deals with such weaknesses and natural tendencies in its own way, which has proven to be remarkably successful. This, however, does not preclude that there remained, particularly in that early period in Madīnah, some traces of such tendencies and weaknesses.

The present verse aims to deal with such elements. Let us look carefully at how the Qur'ān progresses with its method of educating people and raising them to its standards: "*Therefore, do not lose heart or sue for peace. It is you who have the upper hand, and God is with you. He will never let your deeds go to waste.*" (Verse 35) You are the ones who are superior in faith and concept of life, because of your close link with the One who is the Most High. You have higher standards in your way of life, goals, objectives, feelings, morality, manners and behaviour. Therefore, you must not lose heart or sue for peace because you have the upper hand in strength, position and support. The Supreme Power grants you support: "*God is with you.*" You are not alone. God Almighty, with all His power, defends you and gives you help. How insignificant do your enemies appear when God is the One who helps you? Moreover, every effort you exert, everything you spend and every sacrifice you make is credited to you. Nothing is lost: "*He will never let your deeds go to waste.*" The reward for every iota of good work you do will certainly be yours. Why would anyone assured by God to have the upper hand, to be supported by Him and to have every effort rewarded lose heart? Why would he weaken when God tells him that he is honoured, victorious and rewarded?

The life of this world is of little importance. Believers may have to make some sacrifices during their lives on earth, but they will have

their reward in full in the life to come. Moreover, they are not asked to pay heavily in order to ensure such rewards:

> *The life of this world is but play and amusement, but if you believe and are God-fearing, He will grant you your reward. He does not ask you to give up all your possessions.* (Verse 36)

When life has no noble goal to achieve, and when people go through it heedless of the Divine code, it is no more than play and amusement. It is the code laid down by God that makes this life a prelude to a better and longer lasting life, makes of this life a period of action that yields its results in the life to come. Success in the life to come is, therefore, conditional upon good works in this present life. This is the message emphasized in the second sentence in the verse: "*If you believe and are God-fearing, He will grant you your reward.*" (Verse 36) Belief in God during this life and action based on fearing Him are the qualities that gives this present life an air of seriousness elevating it from being a time of play, amusement and material enjoyment to a standard fulfilling the assignment God has given man and for which He has provided proper and complete guidance. When man attends to his assignment in this way, he is a God-fearing believer. What he spends of worldly possessions to serve this cause will not be lost to him. In fact, it produces a far greater reward in the everlasting second life.

Even then, God does not require people to sacrifice all their property. He knows that by nature, man is tight-fisted with what he owns. He does not require him to do what is too hard for him. In fact, He does not charge anyone with more than what that person can reasonably attend to. He is too kind to ask people to sacrifice all they possess. If He were to ask them this, they would be troubled and their ill feelings would become apparent.

> *He does not ask you to give up all your possessions. If He were to ask you all and press you hard, you would grow tight-fisted, and He would bring your malice to light.* (Verses 36–37)

We see here how kind God is to man and how, in His infinite wisdom, He only requires people to do what they can, taking human

nature, with all its facets, into consideration. Islam is a Divine faith which aims to establish a human system on a Divine basis. It is God who lays down its foundation and fundamental principles, but it is human abilities and needs that should be considered in determining its responsibilities. It is God who created man and He knows best what He has created. He is the One who knows all.

Niggardly Man

The final step in this approach deals with the believers' prevailing conditions when they are called upon to make financial sacrifices for God's cause. Their niggardly attitude is dealt with in the same way that the Qur'ān dealt with the reluctance to make personal sacrifices when people are called upon to fight for His cause:

> *You are called upon to give in God's cause, but some among you will turn out to be niggardly. Whoever is niggardly [in God's cause] is niggardly towards himself. God is the source of all wealth, whereas you are the ones in need. If you turn away, He will substitute other people for you, and they will not be like you.* (Verse 38)

This verse provides an accurate description of the Muslim community at the time and how people in all communities react when they are called upon to make sacrifices. It says that some people will be niggardly. This means that others are not niggardly at all; they are prepared to sacrifice everything they have. This was certainly true as is authentically reported by several of the Prophet's Companions. In fact, the Qur'ān describes several such instances in different *sūrahs*. In this respect, Islam produced miraculous examples of people coming forward, with apparent joy, and making really exemplary sacrifices. However, this does not mean that there were not individuals who found it hard to make sacrifices. Indeed, some people may find it easier to put their lives at risk than to make financial sacrifices.

The present verse deals with this natural tendency: "*Whoever is niggardly is niggardly towards himself.*" Whatever contribution people

make is credited to them, and they need it on the Day when they are resurrected. Then, they will have nothing of whatever they owned in this life. All that is left for them is what is credited to their account. Therefore, when they are niggardly, they keep their balance low, depriving themselves of the great reward that financial sacrifice for God's cause surely earns. Thus, they are niggardly towards themselves.

This is absolutely true. God does not require them to make financial contributions for any reason other than the fact that He wants what is best for them. He benefits nothing by anything they spend on His cause. He is not in need of anything: "*God is the source of all wealth, whereas you are the ones in need.*" (Verse 38) It is He who gave you your money and possessions. He is also the One who saves for you whatever contributions you make. He does not need what He has given you in this life or the reward credited to you in the life to come. You are the ones who are in need of Him in both situations. You have nothing unless He grants it to you. Indeed, you will need all the reward He grants you in the hereafter. You cannot pay back to Him anything of what He has bestowed on you in this life, let alone have anything left in the hereafter. It is all given to you out of His grace. How can you be so niggardly?

The last word is decisive. That God has chosen you to be the advocates of His message is an honour and a great favour He bestows on you. You have to prove yourselves worthy of this honour. Unless you so prove yourselves by fulfilling the trust assigned to you, appreciating its value by discarding anything that is contrary to it, God will take back what He has favoured you with, granting this honour to some other people: "*If you turn away, He will substitute other people for you, and they will not be like you.*" (Verse 38)

Anyone who has experienced the great favour of faith, feeling the honour it represents and appreciating the great position he has in the universe as a result of being entrusted with this Divine mission recognizes this last statement in the *sūrah* as a very serious warning. As he walks on earth, such a person feels God's power and experiences His light filling his soul. He bears the emblem of faith. Should such a believer be deprived of true faith, be expelled from Divine care, and find God's door slammed in his face, he will not bear to live. Indeed, life would

become like hell for anyone who has experienced contact with his Lord and then been cut off.

Faith is a great favour and honour, unequalled by anything in the universe. Life becomes so cheap and money so trivial when faith is put on the scales against anything else. Therefore, the warning this last statement in the *sūrah* embodies is the most serious one a believer can receive from God Almighty.